

by Capt. Erik J. Jantzen

Three and a half months into a Westpac cruise in the lovely little sandbox known as Kuwait. Our home was Ali Al Salem Airfield, which brought back fond memories of those austere living conditions we learned at Combined Arms Exercises (CAX) at Twentynine Palms.

This time, I was up for my series of section-leader check rides. I had been a HAC for a while and was raring to get the section-lead qual. The day check was no sweat; the one at night got interesting.

I was to lead a section of CH-53Es to the KC-130 to practice low-light-level, NVG aerial refueling. Then, we'd descend and pick up a low-level TERF route that wove us in and around the scarce, navigable checkpoints strewn about Kuwait. Sounded simple enough, with the challenges being: 1) the aerial refueling, where the opportunity for a mishap (such as the 53's big rotary machetes chopping off the drogue or the probe) increases exponentially, and 2) picking up that all-important first checkpoint of a tough TERF route.

I was crewed with the best H2P in the squadron. We were Rocky 22, and our evaluator, Big Dog, was in Rocky 24. I trusted my copilot enough to fly right seat and do the plugging while I'd back him up with comforting distance and rate estimates from the basket and prepare us for the route.

We joined up with Raider 56, the tanker, and my copilot earned his keep by nailing the plugs. Big Dog's copilot in Dash 2 had a tougher go but still did well. At this point, I thought the flight would be a piece of cake.

After refueling at 2,000 feet AGL, we were to descend to 500 feet AGL, then eventually step down to 200 feet AGL and lower. The interim altitude was supposed

Big Dog's Call Saved Us



to give us a better position for the first checkpoint, and more importantly, to give us a margin of error above a huge cluster of power lines with towers over 200 feet AGL. These towers lay directly between our tanker track and our nav route.

I thought I had briefed every conceivable problem without getting into anybody's cockpit. One question that arose later in the flight was when to make the seemingly basic switch from tanker to nav-common. This omission would come back to haunt me.

After kissing off Raider, we started our descent, with my copilot at the controls and me trying to find that all-important first checkpoint, a road intersection. It's a challenge shifting one's scan from an aircraft 10 feet away to a checkpoint many miles away, but we expected the difficulty. What we hadn't planned on was a giant flame burning from an oil well that lay right in line with our course toward that first CP. The billowing orange flame completely washed out our goggles and made it seem as though we were staring into a bright, green sun.

"Where is that damn intersection?" we both asked. It was crucial for us to get it dead on to pick up the route, but the de-gaining in the NVGs washed it out, too.

By this point, we were both trying hard to find the checkpoint when, out of nowhere it seemed, we heard Dash 2 call, "Altitude, altitude!"

We instantly checked our radalts and yanked the collective. The 53's engines churned out 13,000- shaft-horsepower worth of climb rate as we shot back up to 500 feet. A

sinking feeling then settled in the pit of my stomach as I realized the last thing my radalt showed was 200 feet. We were about to descend through 200 feet AGL and were right over the power-line farm...a farm we almost bought. The silence that followed was deafening. Big Dog confirmed we were on nav-common. We rogered and agreed to a new game plan with an "abbreviated" nav route that brought us back to base for some section bounces and debrief. Not exactly the way I'd planned ending my check flight.

What had happened to my seemingly straightforward check ride? Initially, I let my guard down because I knew I had a solid copilot, which was reinforced by his stellar performance at the tanker. Confidence degenerated to the extent that I had essentially taken myself out of the flying loop and went headlong into navigating during the descent. I then got boresighted on the first checkpoint of the route and let my copilot get sucked into the navigation problem as well. This left us with two navigators staring into washed-out NVGs and no aviators focusing on the instruments and truly flying the helicopter.

My over-confidence going into the flight also led me to assume the frequency change from tanker to TERF-common would be a no-brainer. It proved to be not so clear cut, and the ensuing confusion prevented my Dash 2 from alerting us sooner to our dangerous descent. As it was, Big Dog's altitude calls came out over guard, and not a second too soon.

For all that multipiloted aircraft communities espouse about crew coordination, we can't forget that it doesn't end with our own cockpit. A section or division's strength rests on a foundation of good crew coordination between aircraft. Putting it to work may just keep a wingman out of trouble, like it did for us. Thanks, Big Dog. 🦮

Capt. Jantzen is an instructor pilot with VT-2.

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